

VZCZCXYZ0002
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHFN #0495 3501809
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 161809Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3053

C O N F I D E N T I A L FREETOWN 000495

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: A CHINA'S PD EFFORT FIZZLE IN FREETOWN

Classified By: CDA Glenn Fedzer for reasons 1.4 (d)

1.(C) On November 9, the Chinese Embassy in Freetown opened a photography exhibit in the main hall of Parliament in Freetown. The Chinese Embassy's public diplomacy efforts in Freetown rarely include more than a press release or photo op by the Ambassador at the opening of a construction project. Throughout November, however, the entrance to the Sierra Leonean parliament building has been the site of a photo exhibit on Chinese activities in Africa. Subjects included African heads of state visiting China, cultural exchanges, agricultural projects, and the ongoing construction of the African Union Conference Center in Addis Ababa, among others. This expanded public diplomacy effort, however, appeared to fail, as the minimal attendance and limited media interest diminished the opening's impact.

12. (C) Of the attendees, at least half were representatives of the Chinese Embassy. Journalists were notably absent, as was the diplomatic corps and the NGO community. The official program was short, and remarkable only in its mediocrity: the Speaker of Parliament, Abel Stronge, seemed to have been misinformed about the topic of the exhibit, as he spoke at length about Chinese art, such as calligraphy, dance, and music, but did not discuss the photos or their themes. The Chinese Ambassador spoke at length, but audience members found his English difficult to understand. Take-away bags included a book on the China-Africa Forum, covering activities from 2000-2007, a calendar in Chinese, and a China-Africa Forum lapel pin. Following the event, media coverage was absent, which is surprising given the frequency with which the Chinese generally put out press releases.

13. (C) In a remarkably frank discussion at a reception shortly following the event, a Chinese diplomat described the exhibit as a failed attempt to improve China's image in Freetown, noting the nonexistent media exposure and ambivalence on the part of the key target audience (members of Sierra Leone's parliament). He also criticized, without further elaboration, internal organizational problems and an inability of Chinese Embassy personnel to understand how to reach African audiences. Of note was that the diplomat's perception that the local Chinese image was less than ideal.

14. (C) Comment: The event, certainly neither fresh nor unique in style or substance, nevertheless marked a up-tick from the Chinese Embassy's routine and nearly invisible public diplomacy, and raises the question of what is motivating the Chinese Embassy's interest in a better image. It also revealed some weaknesses in execution, which may be corrected as the Chinese become more familiar with ways to court the Sierra Leonean press corps. End Comment.
FEDZER